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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the variety of decision making proposed by Professor Lortie will not afford the luxury of evaluative systems of the kind he describes. Professor Gordon feels that, had Professor Lortie pursued a line of functional analysis of many outcomes, he would have arrived at an entirely new analysis of the justification for complexity of evaluation. (Author)

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COMMENTS ON PROFESSOR LORTIE'S PAPER ENTITLED "THE CRACKED CAKE OF EDUCATIONAL CUSTOM AND EMERGING ISSUES IN EVALUATION"

C. Wayne Gordon

Center FOR THE
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C. Wayne Gordon

Dr. Lortie's shadow has preceded him; his influence is already apparent in its effect on evaluation. From what I have heard around the country he has had his finger in the cake and has been helping practice the practice of evaluation in his own right.

He disturbs me, however; and this is not a prologue to saying I agree with everything he said, with the monstrous complexity with which he confronts us.

At this point, the evaluator must feel like the centipede who looked out in the morning to see which foot to put down and had to make a decision. He was so cantonized he didn't get up all day.

Fortunately, Lortie has given us a foot or two to put down. I would like to put one or two of them down at the risk of recapping the main set piece for discussion--that is, change. He rather belatedly introduced the dynamic force for economic change in the new discussions and the new discoveries, but the change itself has taken on a value. It is like the new tide--better than the old.

He gives us a set of competing sources for the alternatives we seek. These are largely external to the system--government sources, commercial activism, and even the universities with their wares.

These competing sources are not just standbys; they are sources of control as well. These are not alternatives which the educator-

administrator is free to accept without some coercion. He is obliged to get a grant to develop his particular program. To that extent we do have a new situation, I think; and one which has powerful control implications, powerful for elevating the role of evaluation.

So, we have this harassed educator-administrator who must make decisions; and because there is contention in the system he must make not only correct decisions, but ones that have legitimacy. These won't necessarily be the same. In other words, the most acceptable answer and the basis for having supplied it will not always depend on the validity of the answer or the evidence used to support it.

The professional evaluator is going to be the handmaiden who plays the appropriate pattycake with the educator-administrator's problems. He is like an umpire in the final game of the World Series. He not only has to make the right decision, but he has to have good eyesight.

So, we come to integrity; we must have integrity in this process. But because the administrator has to make choices, we are in the short run faced with heavy demands on evaluation services. Their decisions have to be defended in the face of competing alternatives.

We have set the stage for objectivity and rationality in science and truth. For the first time we have a structural determinism which forces people to be both honest and correct because of the disadvantages of bad choices and bad decisions. We have powerful resources which place demands on us at the highest level of integrity--science and truth.

I notice that Lortie doesn't believe that he wants that much truth or that much knowledge. He says, "The thoughtful school

board members, administrators and teachers will be skeptical of plans made by sponsors of any new approach"; and, "The less thoughtful colleagues may find that the public expects them to appear as if they are giving careful consideration to new policy builders." Here I find the latter point of view the more typical possibility.

I just don't think this variety of decision-making will afford the luxury of evaluative systems of the kind he describes. The demand in this market isn't entirely for the kinds of product he suggests.

Now, even so, it seems to me that he has opted for a classic solution. It's for rationality; it's bureaucratic; he has decisions to be made based on expertise, honesty, and integrity. And we have a profession prepared to provide this expertise. But then he introduced a new problem. He said, "He not only needs answers, but he needs answers to questions which are infinitely more complex than the ones which he has decided." Lortie hinted at the problem of functional analysis of many outcomes, including unintended effects of instruction. If he had pursued this line of reasoning, he would have been led into an entirely new analysis of the justification for complexity of evaluation. I then could have accepted his concern for expanding the range of variables and values.

That is where my centipede arises. The user, the educator-administrator, doesn't want that much knowledge. Yet we must, as Professor Gage says, talk about basic research methods rather than value judgments. The administrator needs quicker, shorter, and more simple-minded answers.

I have another concern. It is for the evaluator because Lortie has made his problem complicated. The evaluator has a stock in trade. In most cases he has a gimmick, a system, a line of goods that he is prepared to provide in this market. We have some symmetry in the insincerity of the request for evaluation and the incapacity of the evaluator to fulfill the demand.

I think the evaluator is a bit like the policeman who found a dead horse on Potawotomi Street. He couldn't spell "Potawotomi" and had to make a report; so he dragged the horse to First Street and wrote the report.

If the demand for the rationality, if the integrity of the answer is not sought to that extent, the educator-administrator can probably do well at a different kind of hot dog stand. He will seek someone more willing to serve in this market, who will not impose on him the complexity which Lortie suggests, nor will he impose on him the embarrassment of going to the public with his problem.

Lortie has added another complexity which is even more difficult, and that is elaborate studies designed to fit the uniquely different facts of the case. This again is messy, difficult, demanding, time consuming, and costly. As you try to prescribe for him the package that will be important for his immediate need, the evaluator is not listening. He is waiting for another kind of advice--how to get the contract renewed.

Now, may I give one more thought? Lortie suggests a rather facile way to get out of the dilemma of how the evaluator can avoid being caught providing unpopular conclusions because of the values present in the package. Lortie has suggested a weighted system of

assessing the results in terms of different value perspectives. He neutralizes the necessity for having values themselves. The evaluator is going to be an operator of relative perspectives from which he derives objectives to assess.

Maybe this is the only way to avoid the dilemma. But would you be willing to consider the kind of optimism which says, let's include enough of the dependent variables in the value area--a smorgasbord of values--i.e., let's get some criteria in there that we haven't been asking about; and then let's observe which independent variables are probable for the best predictions. Could we expect eventually to get a sufficiently generalized system of variables on both sides of the system, independent and dependent, that would achieve an objectivity in which even the evaluator or the researcher would propose values and possible effects that transcend the parochial foci of controversy? At least then we could rest a bit on the possibility that we are not so subject to the winds of the conflict and the controversy that he proposed that we have nothing to offer but to follow the fads that are going to be proposed.